

August 2, 2002

New River Health District Promotes Benefits of Breastfeeding

August is Breastfeeding Awareness Month in Virginia, and the New River Health District wants families to know the health benefits that breastfeeding holds for children and mothers.

Recent research reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggests that children who are breastfed for six months or longer have the lowest risk of being overweight by the time they reach puberty. This is good news for mothers who want good health for their children, according to Brenda Burrus, Nurse Manager Senior for the New River Health District. "A recent survey by the Virginia Department of Health revealed that about one-third of Virginia's fourth graders were overweight or obese. Nationally, it is estimated that about 13 percent of all children in the United States are overweight," says Burrus.

"Breast milk contains all the nutrition a baby needs for the first six months of life," says Debbie Poff, Nutritionist Supervisor for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program for the New River Health District. "Its unique composition increases infants' resistance to asthma, childhood diabetes, ear infections, SIDS, and digestive and respiratory problems. Breastfed children have higher IQs and less tooth decay. A recent study also demonstrated that breastfeeding reduces the pain of immunization in infants", says Poff.

"Women who breastfeed for at least six months also garner health benefits. Some benefits include quicker recovery after childbirth, including postpartum weight loss," said Burrus. She adds that these benefits include reduced risk of osteoporosis as well as breast, ovarian, and cervical cancers. Breastfeeding also reduces parental absence from work.

The practice of breastfeeding received support in the 2002 Virginia General Assembly. Delegate Viola Baskerville, D-Richmond, introduced two bills to help breastfeeding moms overcome obstacles they face. Both bills passed. The Right to Breastfeed bill guarantees a woman the right to breastfeed on any property owned, leased, or controlled by the State, such as State parks and museums. The Virginia Lactation Accommodation Law encourages employers to recognize the benefits of breastfeeding and to provide unpaid break time and appropriate space other than a restroom for employees to breastfeed or express milk for their children. The new laws, which took effect July 1, 2002, will aid the 50 percent of new mothers entering the workforce and will also benefit other women who choose to breastfeed.